

# Mannenberg

a tune for coming together



Sunday Times

**Mannenberg (9 October 1934 - )**

**M**annenberg is the name of a township on the Cape Flats. Many 'coloured' people were removed here when their homes in District Six were destroyed under the apartheid government's Group Areas Act. This Act proclaimed District Six an area for whites only. But Mannenberg is also the name of an 11 minute instrumental that came out of a jamming session in a recording studio in Cape Town's city centre in 1974. The musicians who created it were famous jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (then known as Dollar Brand), Robbie Jansen, Basil 'Mannenberg' Coetzee, Monty Weber, Morris Goldberg and Paul Michaels. Ibrahim says that, '*Mannenberg is where it's happening*', (the song's full title) was not rehearsed. It came out spontaneously. They had difficulty persuading any of the established record companies to take the song and formed their own co-operative to record and market it. Mannenberg sold thousands of copies. Later, after the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed in 1983, Mannenberg was turned into a song to mobilise people and uplift their spirits in the non-racial struggle against apartheid.

Mannenberg comes out of a long history of music in the Cape. Many different musical traditions have been thrown into the mix – slave music; Boer music; music that ex-slaves played at picnics following their emancipation; the music of street parades and carnivals; church music and a host of African urban music forms such as jive, marabi and mbaqanga. Added to that incredible mixture was the sound of American jazz brought to South Africa through the movies and gramophone records.

**Morris Goldberg performing**  
Sunday Times



## Interviews as Historical Sources

In this lesson plan, students are asked to think about how music enables people to express ideas and to affirm the cultural diversity of South Africa. They will be asked to reflect on the value of interviews as sources.



**Abdullah Ibrahim** Sunday Times,  
24 December 1976



**Jazz artist Sathima Bea Benjamin, Abdullah Ibrahim's wife, seen here with one of their two children**  
Sunday Times, 10 January 1975

## The Life of Abdullah Ibrahim

Abdullah Ibrahim's original name was Adolph Johannes Brand. Born in Cape Town in 1934, he lived in the poor suburb of Kensington where his grandmother founded the local branch of the AME (African Methodist Episcopal). His mother played the piano in the church, and they had a piano at home. He also used to hear strains of music from the neighbouring African township, Windermere. When he was young, Ibrahim frequented the dockland area where he mixed with American sailors, which is how he got his nickname 'Dollar', and learned about the music of American jazz great Duke Ellington. In 1953, he met saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi, who he called 'the father of us all'. They formed the Jazz Epistles, later joined by trumpeter Hugh Masekela and trombonist Jonas Gwanga. After the Sharpeville shooting, the apartheid government got tougher and Ibrahim was once arrested while he was playing the piano during a concert. The government did not allow musicians of different races to play together, or in venues that were not designated for their particular racial group. But the essence of jazz is that it brings musicians and their audiences together across many kind of categories and barriers! You can't classify jazz!

Soon after this, Ibrahim went to the US. He was sponsored by Duke Ellington and played with many famous jazz musicians. Ibrahim converted to Islam in the mid 1970s because he realised that the life he and many of his friends were leading, fuelled by drugs, was very destructive. He turned to religion.

Shifrin, T, 'Reunion' in Leadership SA, October 1990

**Abdullah Ibrahim seen here with Kippie Moeketsi (holding the sax)**  
Sunday Times



# Now read what Abdullah Ibrahim had to say about music

## Source A: On the role of music

'There are three aspects of music – devotional, healing and social activity. Whereas in earlier times, the duties of the musician encompassed all these aspects, in a modern setting they are separated, and almost all music happens in the social sphere. The only function you can have as a musician in western society is to become an entertainer.'

We are a diverse community of people, beliefs, cultures, languages, ways of perception, but we are a South African nation. And what can come out of this is something unique. It is an incredible challenge for us as musicians and artists to be able to mould this and come up with a voice... our task as musicians is to dispense the medicine ... to highlight the richness we possess and make the community aware.

Improvisation has to do with the fearlessness of the unknown ... that first note you hit, you have to dare yourself, because it's unknown – your improvisation unfolds as it comes...'

*Shifrin, T, 'Reunion' in Leadership SA, October 1990*

## Source B: On how Mannenberg was born

**Abdullah Ibrahim:** I sat at this piano and it goes (singing out opening notes of Mannenberg), first time. Wow! This thing sounds so nice, it's grooving. I tell my musicians that I work with a lot of music is written right there. So they bring pens and pencils and paper. I'm a composer; you don't know when it's going to happen. So this is how Mannenberg was written. OK, now we have a bridge. OK let's go.

**Sue Valentine:** So it was as you sat down at that piano that you developed that refrain?

**Abdullah Ibrahim:** Yeah.

**Sue Valentine:** So all that rehearsing beforehand?

**Abdullah Ibrahim:** It was all gone (laughs) All the stuff we had rehearsed, when we went back to it, it sounded so flat.

**Sue Valentine:** And so when you hit on that melody, how much did – because I suspect there are a lot of urban legends about this song. Basil picked up on it (Ibrahim nods) and between the two of you, you develop that melody?

**Abdullah Ibrahim:** Because they were all standing there, they couldn't figure what was going on. But Basil was attuned to this because he'd started off playing pennywhistle; he was locked into the tradition. And then of course I'd had the experience of playing dance bands, African dance bands like the Tuxedo Slickers, and we played Xhosa, American swing music, mbaqanga. On the other hand, I also played with coloured dance bands – waltzes, quick steps, squares, passa double, then also the traditional Cape music ... Basil was the first one to take it on... And of course we recorded this song, Mannenberg, when it came and we just played, we just played... I just said: 'let it ride, let ride,' it felt so good ...we finished the song and we listened to it over and over again... (The recording engineer said, 'What is this song?' We said, 'Mannenberg.' He said, 'What?' I said, 'Mannenberg, it's happening in Mannenberg right now.' People were being shot down all over.

**Sue Valentine:** Why Mannenberg as opposed to anywhere else on the Cape Flats?

**Abdullah Ibrahim:** Because Basil was from Mannenberg and for us Mannenberg was just symbolic of the removal out of District Six, which is actually the removal of everybody from everywhere in the world, and Mannenberg specifically because... it signifies, it's our music and our culture...

But Mannenberg is synonymous, not with me, with us. It's our story. And like my high school teacher told me: write about the thing you know, write about the thing you know best.

*Interview of Abdullah Ibrahim by Sue Valentine for Sunday Times Heritage Project, 26 June 2007*

## Learner Activities

- *Source A* – what does Ibrahim say about how the function of music has changed from pre-industrial (pre-modern) times to now? Do you think he feels frustrated by how the role of music has shrunk?
- *Source A* – how can music be medicine?
- *Source B* is an interview with journalist, Sue Valentine. What can you get out of an interview that you can't get from reading reported speech like that in *Source A*? Consider how Ibrahim speaks in the interview, how much information he provides and what he does besides speaking.
- What evidence is there in *Source B* that Sue Valentine is a good listener?

## Other Ideas

Learners could interview local musicians – you probably have several in your school! Also don't forget places of worship as sites for learners to find people who make music.



**Mannenberg Memorial** Cape Town, Sunday Times

## Criteria for Assessment

- Learners can provide ideas about how aspects of culture may have changed between earlier times and now.
- Learners demonstrate appreciation for the value of interviews as sources.
- Learners identify some of the features of a good interviewer.

## Curriculum Link – Grades 10 & 11

LO 1, AS 2

LO 2, AS 1

Grade 10 Content Link – Industrial Revolution (to point out that cultural changes also took place). Grade 11 what was the nature of resistance to apartheid and how part of wider resistance? (and could be linked to protests through music in other parts of the world)